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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the impact of a writing workshop on non-academic writers. Subjects, 11 adult non-academic writers who wrote little, were seldom around others who did, and did not think they were good writers, participated in 10 Saturday sessions conducted in a bookstore in a rural town. They wrote narratives on self-selected topics from tapes collected during interviews with self-selected respondents. Participants formed small groups and offered constructive criticism of each other's stories. Field notes were kept, subjects responded to some of these notes, and "researcher memos" were recorded after reading the field notes. The researcher invited, received, and incorporated subjects' suggestions, recommendations and final approval of the methodology delineating data analysis and subsequent findings. Field notes and participants' remarks demonstrated that all participants but one changed their writing processes during the workshop--they became more aware of what they were doing because others would see their writing and their interactions brought to the surface a sense of pride and accomplishment in their writing. Findings suggest that those who require students to write should find collaborative workshops helpful. (Fourteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Non-Academic Writers:
A Workshop

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Non-academic writers:
A writing workshop

This paper addresses an alternate pedagogical paradigm supported by critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989), and delineated as a collaborative, oral-history, writer's workshop. The concept of critical theory (Giroux, 1987) suggests a writing context that would allow writers to change their writing, but does not expect to measure writing progress as a function of the amount of change (Elbow, 1981). Instead, the value of the writing workshop as a research effort is measured in perceived opportunities for writers to change their writing.

There seems to be sufficient literature to establish that many prospective writers have difficulty writing (Graves, 1983; Murray, 1987), but most of this research was developed with children and academic adult subjects (Atwell, 1987; Shaughnessy, 1977). Difficulty in writing is a somewhat unexplored concept in non-academic settings. Thus, in an attempt to better understand the relationship between adults and their writing, and how this understanding relates to writing instruction, this study explores writing in an non-academic adult writer's workshop. As a reading teacher/researcher, I emphasize writing in my classes. I knew going in I was going to be aware of data relating to writing instruction. In this context then, I wanted to explore possiblilities of a collaborative writer's workshop changing these adults' writing process.

Circumstances of the Workshop

I shared with eleven non-academic adult writers how a writer's workshop could be used as a learning vehicle to help them become more effective writers. It was held during ten Saturday sessions in a book store in a rural town. They wrote narratives on self-selected topics from tapes collected during interviews with self-selected respondents. Claude interviewed a nursing home resident about the area's early 1900's coal industry. Helen interviewed a local resident about how to bake a "special" type of cake. These two examples characterize the remaining interviews. We discussed items pertaining to the interviews during the first meeting. We discussed how to use a tape recorder, and how to protect the respondent confidentiality. We decided not to use real names, but to use real events and locations. We brainstormed about questions to ask. All inserts are from field notes unless noted.

> They seemed to think everyone should ask the same questions. I told them that a few general questions should get them started, but because they were looking for different information, they should direct the majority of questions toward their topics.

We discussed possible steps to start writing a story after the interviews. They agreed to use their respondent information and bring a rough draft of a story. At a later meeting they formed three groups of three and two groups of four to work together (Comstock, 1982). I asked them to read their writings aloud to others in their group. I asked other members of the group to offer constructive criticism. The

group rotated reading until all had an opportunity to read and receive feedback. I visited each group to answer questions.

> These adults ask the same questions as college students. How long does this have to be? How many drafts will we have to make before we're through? I wonder what it would take to get them to deep-six what they learned in school. So, I asked Rose and she said that the stuff she remembers about school is so ingrained that it would be difficult to forget.

This continued for two meetings. I then asked them to bring a "final" draft. However, I knew that what they thought was a final draft would need additional editing and prepared to take them through editing sessions. We edited this draft for three meetings. I wanted them to edit by sharing it with participants who were not members of the original group. I wanted them to continue sharing. They did so for the most part. I participated to the extent that when they could not solve their problems, we would "fix" it together (Murray, 1985). We talked about what they thought was wrong. I did not hesitate to suggest, but always told them that they had the final decision. I tried to help them see problems in their story, especially concentrating on how it flowed and made sense in terms of chronological order. There were occasions where more writing added meaning to what they were trying to say. We worked together, trying to structure, to make sense. This seldom involved "major surgery," but required thinking about process. For example, Dutch and I worked on the following, which represents other changes.

> While working at the mine in 1933, Mr. Roberts crushed his left hand and had to have its index finger removed.

> Mr. Roberts crushed his left hand working at the mine in 1933 and had to have a finger removed.

At the end of the eighth meeting, they had edited their stories as much as possible, short of major surgery. So, I suggested that once they wrote a "last" copy, it would be ready to share with someone outside the workshop. They were glad to hear this, and left with the intentions of returning a week later with their best effort. I told them that even though their best could be improved, they had done all that I had asked in the allowed time. We used the last two meetings to polish their last draft, a last reading for typos and other obvious mistakes. They were joyous. They had accomplished something personally satisfying. They brought copies and passed them around to others. They talked about the future path of their writings. Dutch reported intentions to submit to the county newspaper for possible publication in a community interest column. Mike intended to share his river trip story with a Boy Scouts magazine. These two characterize the others.

Data Collection/Organization/Analysis

I recorded field notes to capture events in the workshop. I kept a pad close to list key words and phrases (Spradley, 1980). I typed the notes into to a computer following each workshop using the pad as reference. I printed copies of the notes and mailed them to three participants of three groups. I chose them by making a list of their names and asking my daughter to select any three at

random. I asked these three to read, make corrections or amplifications, and return them. They did. I added the input to the field notes. For example, one noted that our conversation did not include one of her responses. Thus, I collected ten sets of data labeled "field notes," and the participants' responses. I also recorded "researcher memos" in a journal when I read the field notes and the responses. The bulk of the data made it unmanageable. I employed Tesch's (1990) multi-step model for developing an organizing system, Seidel's (1988) computer software The Ethnograph® to manage the data and Jone's (1985) inductive mapping techniques to analyze the data. A triangulation process captured a more complete, holistic, and contextual picture of the study (Jick, 1979) because the data were examined from several perspectives, and each commented on the analysis and findings. I managed the study and commanded the final responsibility, but shared the direction of the triangulation with the responding participants. I controlled the writing conventions of the final report. The participants' input during the study, and during the analysis of the data placed them in the unique position of also contributing. I invited, received, and incorporated their suggestions, recommendations and final approval of the methodology delineating data analysis and subsequent findings.

Workshop Events

Helen did not see herself as an effective writer before the workshop. "I write some, grocery lists, but a writer?

No, I've not seen my writing in print. I don't have the guts to try to get anything printed." The fact Helen even came suggests that she may entertain thoughts of someday seeing her writing in print. Perhaps beforehand, writing was more effort than she was willing to accommodate. Regardless, during the workshop, she scheduled writing time in daily activities.

> Helen told Louise she was sitting aside an hour each night to practice writing. That's great! Maybe Helen will learn to like it. Maybe Louise can help.

Conceivably, Helen found enough enjoyment in sharing writing to schedule daily writing time. She also thought to be a writer, she had to publish, but she changed her mind.

> Helen has changed her mind! She told Louise that she's going to send her story to a magazine in Ohio that prints stories about teen-age runaways.

This suggests that Helen came to see herself more as a writer because of the interaction with others.

Harold did not think anyone would want to read his writing. "Sure, I write when I make my lessons for church, but I'm not a writer. Who would want to read my writing? It's only squiggles." However, Harold shared with Bob, a member of his group.

> Harold showed Bob a paragraph today. This may be the first step. He asked Bob's help in arranging sentences. This shows he's more interested than he first let on.

Harold was in a group where others would read his writing. This setting gave him an opportunity to expand his audience,

maybe forced him to share. Harold become more interested in writing, and what others thought about it during interaction with Helen and Bob.

Jack and Mike understood their writing process as either correct or incorrect. They did not have much knowledge of editing as a process to improve writing. Jack saw only extremes on the writing continuum--"right" at one extremity and "wrong" at the other. "I try to write right, but doubt I'm always right. I was taught in school there is a right and a wrong way to write. It's either right or it's wrong. It's that simple." This suggests Jack arrived thinking writing is a one time process.

> Jack's with Mike and Maude. I heard Jack telling them that he's glad he came, even though he didn't think it was a good idea. Jack read his story and asked what they thought. I'm glad Maude told him that most of it was fine, and that the three could work together to straighten it out.

Maude and Mike helped Jack edit. Maude made most of the suggestions. Jack's quick acceptance of her input surprised me. After the first meeting, I did not hear Jack talk about "right" or "wrong" writing. He usually accepted Maude's input.

> I visited Jack's group. Here's one way they edited. They didn't waste time. The first sentence in Jack's tale went like this, "It was a warm spring day, Mom was in the garden." Jack agreed to this change, "On a warm spring day, Mom was in the garden." I don't think he lost meaning. Maude told him that he wouldn't lose any, but it's not conventional to start with "it." I don't know about that, but Jack accepted.

Thus, Jack, with Maude and Mike's help, finished his story about an incident in his respondent's childhood, finding a

squirrel in a rattlesnake's stomach. "I plan to send this to Mom and Dad in Missouri. They like to read this stuff." Maude was as happy as Jack. "Can you imagine that Jack? He came with nothing and leaves with something he is proud of."

Mike's experiences were similar. He also understood writing as a right/wrong process. However, he came wrestling with his writing process. "There's a right way and a wrong way. I know that. I keep my old English book close to check things." This suggest that he was content with writing being either right/wrong. Further, he intended to write right, with help from the text, but the interaction between him and Maude changed this outlook.

> Mike doesn't have his text today. I asked Maude about this. She indicated he told her three heads were better than one, and he was going to leave the book home.

Conceivably, Maude, and perhaps Jack, influenced Mike, to the extent that he weighed their suggestions against his text. At any rate, Mike did not bring it again. This surprised me and I asked him about it. "It just seems that I was learning about editing, changing stuff. I don't have time to look up every problem I had." Mike did not finish his story. At the end, he told me that he wanted to continue the editing sessions, but knew others did not have time to help. I told him that perhaps we could get together and continue working at our leisure.

Claudia and Dutch, who grouped with Gene, brought more writing experience than the others, but even they felt outside influences controlled their writing. Claudia

understood writing to be whatever publishers/editors wanted it to be. "They are the gatekeepers. If we don't get past them, we might as well not write." From personal journal

> This reference sounds like academic jargon. I should ask what she means 'might as well not write." I wonder if she targets writing toward publishers/editors?"

Later, I received my answer, "They control writing because if we don't get past them, no one who matters gets to read our writing, and yes, when I write, I have them foremost in mind." Claudia did not change. She was willing to participate, help others, and receive feedback about her story, but never backed off about gatekeepers.

> Claudia won't back off. She told Gene that it didn't matter what he thought, she was going to write her way because a college instructor told her this was the way publishers wanted it. She cowers Gene, but Dutch stand up to her sometimes.

"Don't you see, Claudia, that if Gene and I help you, you will be able to present a cleaner copy?" At the end, Claudia was saying that if she could get a newspaper editor to accept her story, someone who mattered would finally get to read her writing.

At first, Dutch felt the same, but he changed his mind before the end. "The only way for anyone to read my writing is controlled by publishers/editors. They make a decision based on money about the quality of my writing. When they turn it down, they are telling me, 'This isn't writing.'" Afterwards, Dutch probably faced the same problems as before, but he knew that others would want to read his writing.

> Dutch gave copies to Rose Marie and Bob today. I overheard Bob telling him that it was terrific and that he should make copies for everyone.

This did not solve his problems, but did give him a wider audience than before. Gene analyzed Claudia and Dutch's suggestions. Part of his learning was knowing when to accept and discard their suggestions.

> I noticed Gene accepted one of Dutch's suggestions, but with reservations. He told Dutch that he would consider it. Claudia stepped in and said that he might as well change it now. It wouldn't be right otherwise.

Digesting the pros/cons of writing nurtured Gene's writing effectiveness. He accumulated useful knowledge for future use, discarded ineffective knowledge. Gene controlled and acknowledged ownership in writing.

At first, Bob understood writing to be a one time process.

> Bob and his group discussed the editing process. He told them that he thought he could just sit down and write a story.

This suggests that Bob had limited knowledge about the editing process, thinking that the first attempt should be the final one. Rose said about the same, "When reading the newspaper, I never thought about writers making more than one copy. I thought they wrote, printed, and I read it." When Bob and Rose were forced to go through and editing process, they were introduced to another way of writing. This process taught them that writing is more than a one time process and their writing improves during the editing. Rose now understands that the newspaper she reads is not the first

effort. They came to understand that their first draft is but the first of many steps to be taken before the process becomes product.

Louise brought an understanding that her feelings about writing played the determinate role in differentiating effective and non-effective writing. To her, writing with feeling produced more effective writing. "If it does not have my feelings in it, then to me, it's not 'real writing.'" Although she wrote with feeling, she had trouble transferring meaning to others.

> Louise directs her first draft toward herself. Parts were understood only by herself, and she had difficulty transferring meaning to others. Rose told her that she didn't understand her writing.

Louise's story evolved during editing session to where others better understood. This understanding played a positive role in her acceptance that meaning in writing is as important as content. The workshop did not change her attitudes about feelings. However, she realized that she could turn feelings into more effective writing through the editing process, and by discussing feelings with others.

Discussion

Beforehand, these adults, except for Claudia and Dutch, did not write much, were seldom around others who did, and did not think they were good writers. They also seemed to have limited knowledge about editing. Jack and Mike thought writing was a one time process. What knowledge they did bring seems to have been more influenced by what they

remembered from writing during school than by what they acquired over the years. Several, such as Louise, felt feelings played an important role in their writing process. They struggled with ways to transfer feelings through meaning to others. They used the editing process to accomplish this.

All, with the exception of Claudia, changed their writing process during the workshop. They became more aware of what they were doing because others would/could see their writing. To write effectively became a challenge, but several, like Gene, did not take peer suggestions as fact. Each carried their own weight, even Claudia, in each group because the others demanded it. Their interactions brought to the surface a sense of pride and accomplishment in their writing. The editing process was responsible for extending their knowledge about writing.

Those who require students to write should find collaborative workshops helpful. A writer learns from another regardless of context or learning level. The rational, meaningful, and positive practice of writing through peer-group editing sessions should increase writing competence. Student can learn from others different ways to transfer text meaning. We should find that those more experienced, like Maude, rise to the challenge and help the less experienced. We should find that personal ownership in writing will be raised to a higher level when we allow writers to share their knowledge. We should allow students to write in a context that does not restrain interest in

learning new ways of writing. Peers who applaud and positively reinforce writing enhance others to become more successful writers. Students at all levels should be given opportunities to write personal choice stories, and share them with others in groups. Although Helen and Harold, two self-described non-writers came with adverse concepts about themselves as writers, their interaction with others seemed to have had a metamorphosis effect on their feeling and attitudes toward themselves as writers.

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